

Engaging and Researching Our Communities – Information Triangle

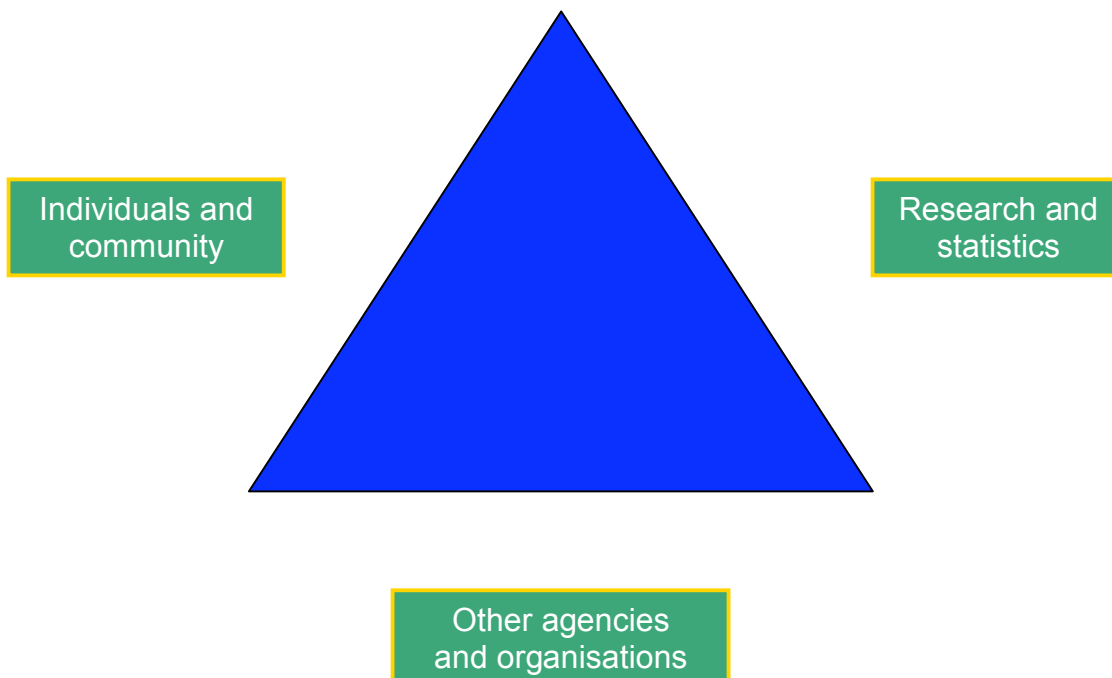
Social Action Journey – Stage Two

The Information Triangle is designed to help people establish the real needs of the community, before planning or setting up a church-based initiative. There is no substitute for researching the area and taking time to listen to the problems, and suggested solutions, of the people who live there.

There three key ways in which you can find out about a community: speak to individuals and groups, liaise with other agencies and consult reports and statistics that have been written. In this way you will have both quantitative and qualitative data about the area, i.e. facts about what it is like and stories/ information about what people think of it.

In practice we have found that in deprived areas of the country there is a lot of fresh, up-to-date data depicting communities. You do not want to carry out a community survey hot on the heels of another, so in some places it may be less appropriate to conduct face-to-face research than others.

However, overall it is a good idea to try to get some information from all three sides of the “triangle”, so that you get a balanced and more whole picture of what is happening.



Individuals and Community

A key principle is to ask people in the community what their needs are and what they would like to see change. In areas affected by deprivation residents often feel that people come in and tell them what to do. Yet, quite rightly, they feel best placed to express the problems and needs of their local area. Doing face to face questionnaires can be useful for this.

When you do approach people to ask their opinions, be aware that communities are weary of being asked their views, having their expectations raised, and then seeing nothing done with the research. So be realistic with your questions, and before you approach people be sure that you will be able to act on what you hear. However, not to put you off, the process of listening to residents is very worthwhile, as it empowers them and gets them involved in the project from an early stage.

Research and Statistics

In most areas affected by deprivation around the country there are government and agency reports and statistics available, which record information such as rates of unemployment, health issues and educational achievements. The council, your local library and government websites are both good starting points for researching data, such as OFSTED reports, National Census statistics and 'Baseline studies' from Local Regeneration Partnerships.

Some things will seem obvious from these reports, but others will be highlighted, which may be more surprising. They will help you to paint a picture of your local community and identify the key areas of need.

Other Agencies and Organisations

Find out what other agencies, voluntary groups and churches are doing in your area. This covers a wide range of organisations, including Citizens Advice Bureau, Housing Association, Day Centres, Visiting Schemes, Job Centre, Women's Aid and so on.

This process is very useful for identifying what services already exist and where there are gaps in the provision. Through this exercise you will begin to build contacts with local agencies, which may become valuable links as your project develops. Having undertaken these three research methods, you will have some good qualitative and quantitative information about your local community. You will have a picture of what your community currently looks like, what people want to see change, what other groups you could work alongside and the key areas of need that are not being met.